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Protecting Children Online Speech – 12th June 2013

On Monday, the Home Affairs Select Committee launched its report into child sexual grooming. Rotherham was one of the areas that figured due to historic failings in tackling this vile crime. Since my appointment 6 months ago, I have made it my mission to make sure we don't let Rotherham children, indeed all children, down like this again.

Rotherham Council and South Yorkshire police are now working collaboratively with the national charity Barnardos and local charities Safe @last and GROW. Together they will implement preventative measures, investigate and prosecute abusers. Since January there have been 34 investigations into CSE with 7 offenders now being prosecuted and currently there are 4 major on-going operations.

Mr Speaker, I assure you, and this House, that I will be watching like a hawk to make sure the authorities continue to protect our children.

However, child sexual exploitation has been a steadily increasing across the UK. Barnardo's runs 24 sexual exploitation services across the country, and they have seen a 22% increase in the numbers of sexually exploited children in 2011-12.

The internet had been used in the majority of cases.

The dramatic rise in the use of communication technology and the development of new forms of social interaction online has hugely complicated child protection in Britain. Social media has greatly increased the ability of gangs and individuals to target vulnerable children. Children naively share a great deal of information online, and are often unaware of the risks in doing so, or indeed, of the security measures to available protect them.

Abusers have always been able to identify vulnerable children. Social media and mobile phones now make it easy for them to make contact.

Technology has left parents with an extremely difficult task of monitoring their children's interactions and recognising potentially dangerous situations. Children and parents must be better educated as to the risks of online communications, and the safeguards that are available.

I urge this house to support our proposal to have Safe Search as the default option on computers and search engines. Filters already exist to screen out harmful material, but 54% of parents whose children use the internet at home have no parental controls installed on the device. By making filters the factory setting, this risk is then removed and parents have the option to opt-out of the system if they see fit.

Social media has increasingly exposed younger and younger children to sexualised material. 24% of 9-16 year olds in the UK say that they have seen sexual images in the past 12 months, on or offline.

A number of services have linked exposure to overtly sexual content via the internet with children displaying inappropriately sexual behaviour. Such behaviour has been highlighted as contributing to greater vulnerability of younger and younger children.

I do not believe in censoring the internet, but it is important that children are protected from inappropriate content.

Increased sexual behaviour amongst children has in the past led to a perception that they are somehow complicit in their abuse. Regrettably, this has frequently been an obstacle to proper safeguarding measures being taken. Equally horrifyingly, the child's sexual awareness has been successfully used in courts to enable the abusers to get a lesser sentence.

Work is being done to tackle this attitude amongst authorities and police forces, but I believe it is imperative that proper training is provided to staff to ensure they take all cases seriously and recognise the need to protect children, regardless of the child's own attitude or behaviour

Mr Speaker, Technology is by its nature evolving. Agencies face an extremely complex task in keeping up with developments and ensuring that procedures are adequate and staff are well trained to meet existing and developing challenges.

The complexity of these challenges has demonstrated the need for better coordinate operations. Agencies must ensure that there is a free-flow of information between them as, in the past, it has proved too easy for vulnerable children to fall through the gaps due to poor communication. Levels of coordination vary widely throughout the country. This should not be allowed to continue.

We must also recognise that whilst child protection must always be the primary focus, prosecutions must not be allowed to become an ancillary concern. I recognise that prosecutions in these cases can be extremely difficult. But without a proper deterrent, the risk of child abuse will continue to rise.

We must insure that the law is fit for purpose. New forms of abuse and grooming, especially those on-line, may not always fall under existing laws. It is our duty to provide our police and child protection officers with the tools they require to ensure that vulnerable children are protected and that offenders are prosecuted.

A number of recent cases, including in my own constituency, have highlighted the need for action to do more to tackle child abuse. Good work is being done to ensure that children are protected, but, I want to stress that more needs be done to meet the demands of a complex and fast-changing problem.

We must ensure that vulnerable children are not failed again.